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A field guide from Filbert Press

What Is a Crevice Garden?

How it works, how to build one — and the plants no ordinary garden can grow

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A rockery scatters stones. A crevice garden does the opposite.

It packs stone tightly together, on edge, and grows plants in the narrow seams between. That one inversion — gap, not boulder — is what lets a crevice garden grow alpines, succulents and dryland plants that most temperate gardens simply cannot keep alive.

Whether it fills a patio trough or an acre of public park, the modern crevice garden is a style of rock gardening built to mimic the lean, sharply drained conditions plants meet in the wild — the fissures of mountain screes, steppes and rocky coasts. Built on a raised mound or slope, with rock buried over at least half its surface, it reads as a natural outcrop. And once it is in, it asks remarkably little of you.

Its champions make a bigger claim. To the Czech master Zdeněk Zvolánek, who wrote the book's foreword, crevice gardening is nothing less than *"the highest discipline in horticulture"* — "nature's first step in slowly changing the naked surface of our rocky planet into a piece of paradise."

Rock-dominated places represent the extremes of where life can exist — and the model for every crevice garden. Photograph: Paul Spriggs, from *The Crevice Garden*.

Why a crevice garden works

Most plants are, in the authors' words, almost tragically designed: the top wants sun, wind and warmth, while the roots want cool, dark, steady moisture. In open ground you can give them one or the other. A crevice garden gives them both at once — because the stone physically **separates the two halves of the plant** and hands each the conditions it craves.

Three things happen between the rocks:

- **The surface dries; the depth stays moist.** Rain runs off the impermeable stone and is forced down into the cool root-run below. Up top, gravel and rock bake dry — exactly what crowns and new growth need to ripen and survive winter.
- **Every face is a different climate.** A sunny south face and a shaded north face just centimetres apart can differ by 11 °C (20 °F) — two whole hardiness zones. The authors call building one of these aspects *"creating a tiny foreign country in your garden"*, tuned to a plant's distant homeland.
- **More garden, less water.** Raising and rippling the surface doubles or triples the plantable area of the same footprint — and the whole thing thrives on a fraction of the irrigation a border needs.

In a world where water is increasingly scarce, these rock gardens are not only pretty, but surprisingly resilient.

Margaret Roach · The New York Times

The cardinal rules

The look and the life of a crevice garden come down to a handful of decisions made, as the authors put it, "not with a pencil, but with a rock in hand."

Do

- Aim for narrow crevices — about 2.5 cm (1 in) wide
- Keep light, sandy media above heavier soils
- Use an irregular footprint and asymmetry
- Orient the rock strata oblique to nearby lines
- Build tall — for drama and for drainage

- Use all sizes of rock; bury each at least by half

Don’t

- Choose oversized plants
- Space stones so wide they don’t touch
- Bury rocks shallowly — they’ll wobble underfoot
- Use too much compost
- Build under trees or beside weedy, running grasses
- Mix several different rock types

How to build a crevice garden in eight steps

A crevice garden can be a single trough or a whole hillside; the sequence is the same at every scale. Here is the shape of the build — the detail, the soil recipes and the rock-arranging craft fill a chapter of the book.

1. **Source & stage the stone**Find one rock type — quarry, landscape supplier, even permitted roadside stone. Stage it on site and get to know each piece before a single one goes down.
2. **Dig the perimeter**Mark an irregular, asymmetrical footprint, then trench the edges so the rim stones sit at least half-buried. Strip and kill turf — buried rhizomes are the real enemy.
3. **Mound the soil**Pile your lean, free-draining medium into a sculpted mound a stone’s depth short of the final height. Asymmetry is everything: one high point, off-centre.
4. **Set the first & perimeter stones**The first stone informs every other. Take a compass bearing of its flat face and let that strata-line govern the whole outcrop. Bury rims back to grade.
5. **Lay the courses**Build stratum by stratum, faces parallel, stepping each course up or down with the contour. Stagger the vertical joints like brickwork so crevices stay stable.
6. **Set the rest of the stone**Fill in with smaller rock by feel, half-buried as a rule. Pack the crevices to collapse air pockets so nothing shifts in the years to come.
7. **Fill & top-dress**Work lean soil into every seam, settle it with water or boots, then a gravel top-dressing of the same stone — the dressing that keeps crowns dry and weeds down.

8. **Plant it**Plant young and bare-root, roots dangling deep, crown level with the rock — never the gravel. Start with the easy pioneers; let them teach you your microclimates.

The goal, in the words of the great rock gardener Reginald Farrer in 1919, is that *“every rock should look as if it belonged to the next, and had been its bed-fellow since the foundations of the hills were laid.”* And if a join still bothers you: good plants hide bad rockwork.

Why now

Crevice gardening is having its moment for a reason. As summers grow hotter and water scarcer, a planting that shrugs off drought and needs little irrigation stops being a curiosity and starts being sensible — a living alternative to raised beds and retaining walls. The rocks shelter wildlife, re-use waste materials, and can safeguard rare, habitat-restricted plants that have nowhere else to grow.

For Kenton Seth, that is the whole point: *“crevice gardens are part of that new mending.”* Charismatic plants come and go with the seasons — but the rocks remain for generations.